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When words feel right: How affective expressions of listeners change a speaker's language use

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Abstract

Based on conversation research and work showing that affective cues help to tune information processing to situational demands, it was hypothesized that affective expressions of listeners would influence how speakers represent communicated information in language. Participants were asked to orally communicate an event presented in a film clip to two other participants. These other participants were actually confederates who either adopted a positive or negative nonverbal expression during the story of the participant. Results show that participants talking to smiling listeners used more interpretive, abstract language, whereas participants talking to frowning listeners stayed with the concrete and descriptive facts. These effects of external affective cues on language abstraction were not mediated by the speaker's mood. Implications for interpersonal conversation are discussed. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

The notion that speakers are responsive to the reactions of their conversation partners seems generally accepted. Models about the dynamics of face-to-face conversations view conversation as a joint activity, a duet, in which conversation partners collaborate to create mutual understanding. Speakers constantly monitor their conversation partner and change their utterances depending on the listeners' replies and feedback (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Clark & Krych, 2004; Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). Even in asymmetrical dialogues, when a listener has no speaking role, the "mere listener" exerts an effect on the way a speaker tells a narrative (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Kraut, Lewis, & Swezey, 1982). How exactly speakers adapt their language to listeners' reactions, however, remains quite unclear.

One important factor that may exert an effect on a speaker's language use is the nonverbal affective expression of conversation partners, perceivable in facial expression, bodily posture, and speech intonation. Facial expressions of listeners, for instance, convey positive or negative emotional reactions to what is said and can simultaneously function as conversational signals that regulate the structure of talk (Brunner, 1979; Ekman, 1997). It seems highly plausible that the affective expression of a conversation partner has an influence on what you say. Who remains unaffected when their audience frowns upon them, or instead, positively smiles at everything they say? Accordingly, the importance of studying affective influences on interpersonal communication and language use has often been stressed (Forgas, 1999; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Yet, to date, research conducted on this topic has been surprisingly scarce, despite the importance of conversation in nearly every aspect of human life, and the consequences that subtle variations in language use can have (Krauss & Fussell, 1996).

In the present research, I focus on the effects of listeners' affective expression on a speaker's language use. Specifically, I investigated whether speakers, when talking to either a smiling or a frowning audience, would tune to a different level of abstraction when representing information in language. Before detailing the present research, I will describe two distinct areas of literature that, even though they are rarely considered in concert, provide complementing support for the hypothesis that nonverbal affective expressions of listeners have an effect on a speaker's language use, and in particular on language abstraction.

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AFFECTIVE EXPRESSIONS AS SIGNALS ABOUT ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

A first argument for this hypothesis follows from the assumption that affective expressions of listeners can inform speakers about the level of acceptance and understanding of what is said. Facial expressions of a listener (e.g., a smile or a frown), for instance, signal the listener's personal response to what a speaker has just said. This might mean agreement or disagreement, amusement, or any other reaction. Simultaneously, a personal reaction implies understanding (or lack of it) and involvement in the conversation (Brunner, 1979). Positive affective expressions of a listener (e.g., a smile) are most likely perceived by speakers as signs of acceptance and understanding, whereas negative expressions (e.g., a frown) will be perceived as signs of rejection or misunderstanding. A vast amount of research has demonstrated that such signals (i.e., back-channel responses) play a crucial role in conversations. Speakers rely on this feedback to efficiently get ideas and information across and, if necessary, repair or adjust their utterances to maintain common ground with their audience (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Krauss, Garlock, Bricker, & McMahon, 1977; Kraut et al., 1982). Aside from providing feedback on specific utterances, a listener's general affective expression in bodily posture (e.g., leaning forward vs. backward) and facial expression presumably also communicates whether a listener has a general accepting, agreeing attitude or a general critical, disagreeing attitude.

Level of abstraction appears to be an aspect of language that is particularly sensitive to signals about the (expected) amount of understanding and acceptance. When conversation partners take information as mutually accepted and understood they can be less precise, and the level of interpretation (i.e., abstraction) increases. Research on reference (Isaacs & Clark, 1987; Krauss & Fussell, 1991) provides indirect evidence for this idea. In the classic paradigm studying reference, participants are required to describe nonsense figures to an addressee. Typically, it is demonstrated that when perceived common ground with the addressee increases, the figures are described in a more interpretive fashion. That is, more figuratively, in terms of what they are like (e.g., "like a spider," "Picasso nude"). Such more interpretive descriptions are only effective when the conversation partners share an interpretive framework, and have reached agreement and mutual understanding. When mutual understanding, or common ground, with the addressee is low, however, the figures are described in a descriptive, analytic, or literal fashion, in terms of their geometric elements (e.g., lines, squares). This is functional because such descriptive, concrete messages can be understood without mutual agreement about how to interpret a stimulus figure (Fussell & Krauss, 1989; Krauss & Weinheimer, 1966).

In addition, work on language abstraction suggests that under conditions in which information is taken for granted and processed in an uncritical manner, a tendency toward abstraction is encouraged. When the validity of information (e.g., Bob is dishonest) is challenged, however, for instance by questions such as *Why did you say that?* or *What do you mean?*, the likely nature of defence is to provide concrete evidence and refer to a description of an event (e.g., He lied to me; Fiedler, Semin, & Bolten, 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Thus, when positive affective expressions of listeners are perceived as signals of acceptance and understanding, they should induce an increase in abstraction of a speaker's message, whereas negative affective expressions (perceived as signals of rejection, criticism, or misunderstanding) should decrease abstraction.

AFFECTIVE EXPRESSIONS AND COGNITIVE PROCESSING STYLES

Research on the informative function of affective cues complements the above in suggesting that listeners' affective expressions should change language abstraction. The affect-as-information account argues that both internal affective cues (i.e., mood states; Schwarz, 2002; Schwarz & Clore, 1996) as well as external affective cues (e.g., expressions of others; Soldat & Sinclair, 2001) play an important role in cognitive tuning and regulating information processing styles. In general, individuals who experience or perceive positive affective cues tend to think about information in a global and abstract way, whereas individuals who experience and perceive negative affective cues tune to thinking at a more specific, concrete level. For instance, individuals in a positive, compared to negative mood, have been shown to rely more on general knowledge structures such as stereotypes, and general behavioral scripts (Bless, 2000); to use broader and more inclusive categories when sorting exemplars into categories (Isen & Daubman, 1984); to process visual stimuli more globally (Gasper & Clore, 2002); and prefer to hear more global trait, rather than specific behavioral information (Isbell, Burns, & Haar, 2005).

External affective cues, like the positive or negative facial expressions of a conversation partner, have a similar effect on cognitive processing styles. For instance, speakers talking to a smiling audience are found to process the communicated information in a global manner, whereas speakers talking to a frowning audience tune to analytic processing (Soldat & Sinclair, 2001, study 2). Moreover, affective expressions of a speaker have been shown to induce the same changes in the processing style of message recipients (Ottati, Terkildsen, & Hubbart, 1997).

The affect-as-information-account (Schwarz, 2002; Schwarz & Clore, 1996) and cognitive-tuning-accounts (Bless & Fiedler, 1995) argue that these effects are highly adaptive. Positive affective cues signal that the present situation is benign, and therefore a global and superficial processing style is sufficient to deal with the situation and the task at hand. Negative affective cues, in contrast, signal that the situation is difficult or problematic, and therefore requires attention to detail. Consequently, negative cues induce a focus on specifics, and a careful and analytic processing style. Thus, affective cues ensure that our cognitive processes are responsive and “tuned” to the present situational requirements (Clore, Gasper, & Garvin, 2001; Clore, Wyer, Dienes, Gasper, Gohm, & Isbell, 2001; Schwarz & Skurnik, 2003).

The link to the present research question lies in the fact that the different processing styles induced by experienced or perceived affective cues are likely to come about in language use. Previous studies demonstrated that processing styles induced by internal affective cues (i.e., mood) are reflected in language abstraction in written communications (Beukeboom & De Jong, 2008; Beukeboom & Semin, 2005, 2006). When people are in a negative mood they tend to use more concrete predicates (e.g., descriptive verbs) to describe an event. The use of these concrete descriptive verbs reflects a careful and analytic processing style, since these words retain more of the contextual detail (e.g., “Jack is talking to Sue”). In contrast, when people are in a positive mood and asked to describe the same situation, their representation features relatively more abstract and interpretive predicates (e.g., adjectives). The use of these abstract and interpretive words (e.g., “Jack is persuasive”) reflects a global and general processing style, since these words decontextualize the event and convey a subjective interpretation of the event (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). Since listeners’ affective expressions induce similar, mood-like changes in the way in which a speaker cognitively processes communicated information (Soldat & Sinclair, 2001), these external affective cues should also result in changes in language abstraction.

LISTENERS’ AFFECTIVE EXPRESSION AND LANGUAGE ABSTRACTION

Both lines of reasoning described above, suggest that speakers implicitly rely on listeners’ affective expressions to assess how they are required to deal with the information they are formulating. Positive affective expressions of listeners are likely to be perceived by a speaker as signals of acceptance and understanding of what is said, and can simultaneously induce a global processing style. Hence, when a story is told to a listener who responds positively (e.g., by smiling), the speaker is likely to represent the information in an interpretive way, reflected in an increased use of abstract predicates. This is adaptive, because speakers now tune to interpretive thinking and communicating when they feel that the situation allows for it, when listeners signal acceptance and understanding by means of positive affective expressions.

When listeners express negative feelings, however (e.g., by frowning), this is most likely perceived as a signal of rejection or misunderstanding. In that case, a speaker is likely to process and formulate information more carefully and analytically, which is reflected in concrete, descriptive language. By using concrete language people stick to the descriptive facts, which is a more careful way of formulating information. This style is called for in difficult conversational situations.

The main goal of the present research is to investigate whether the proposed effect indeed occurs and to inspire further research into the underlying mechanism. However, one obvious and plausible mediating mechanism is tested, namely whether possible effects of listeners’ affective expressions on a speaker’s language use are mediated by the speaker’s mood. Besides an effect of positive and negative affective expressions of listeners, one can expect an effect of the speaker’s own mood on his or her language use (Beukeboom & Semin, 2006). Moreover, expressions of listeners may induce a congruent mood state in the speaker (i.e., mood contagion, Neumann & Strack, 2000). Hence, effects of affective expressions of listeners on a speaker’s language use might be mediated by the speaker’s mood. The previously discussed work, however (Ottati et al., 1997; Soldat & Sinclair, 2001), found that external affective cues exert a direct effect on information processing, without affecting mood. The present study allowed me to test how external affective cues (listeners’ affective expressions) influence language use in face-to-face communication and additionally investigate

effects of internal affective cues (speaker's mood). Participants were shown a neutral film clip, after which they were unexpectedly asked to communicate the content of this film clip to two other participants. These other participants were actually confederates who either adopted a positive or negative affective expression during the story of the participant. The mean level of abstraction of the language used to tell the story was examined.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Fifty-seven undergraduates at the VU University Amsterdam (35 women, 22 men, mean age 22 years) participated and were paid €4. They were randomly assigned to one of two between participants listeners-expression conditions (positive expression vs. negative expression).¹ The main dependent variable was language abstraction as defined by the Linguistic Category Model (LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Procedure

When participants arrived in the lab a first experimenter told them that two other participants had already started. They were led into a room where the other participants (our two confederates) were working on a computer. A second experimenter seated them behind a third computer, which was separated from the other participants by screens. Further instructions were presented on the computer screen. Next, participants watched the target film clip (wearing headphones) on the computer screen. It was not revealed that they would have to describe it later on. The film clip (duration 8.21 minutes) was a neutral film about a Belgian owner of a small kiosk, interacting with customers and the paper boy. The clip contained little conversation, to prevent literal descriptions of the spoken words.

After the film clip, a brief mood check was included in which participants reported the extent to which they experienced "positive feelings" and "negative feelings" at this moment. They answered on two 10-point scales ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much* (*mood measure 1*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$).

Next, participants read on the computer screen that this was "a study on communication in which all sorts of information is passed on." It was explained that they were now supposed to take a seat at the table in this room, and communicate the events from the film clip to the other two participants present. These other participants, they read, had not seen the film clip, and were at this moment instructed to listen to the story of the film clip. All three of them would answer some questions on the computer after the story was told. It was stressed that they could tell the story in any way they liked, that there was no right or wrong way to do this, and that they should take the time for it. When participant and confederates signaled that they were ready, the experimenter seated the participant in a chair in the same room at a low coffee table, and the confederates in chairs opposite to the participant. The experimenter then asked all three of them to shortly introduce themselves. After the experimenter had briefly repeated instructions, the participant started talking about the film.

From the point where they were seated opposite the participant, the confederates, depending on condition, both adopted either a nonverbal positive or negative affective expression in their general appearance as well as in response to what the participant was saying. To prevent possible sex effects one confederate was male and one female. They were trained to adopt a positive expression by smiling, nodding, returning smiles of the participant and maintaining an open bodily position. Or a negative affective expression, by adopting a serious, frowning facial expression, a closed bodily position, and not returning smiles of the participant. In both conditions they faced the participant and did not verbally respond to the story.

The stories participants told were recorded by a hidden camera and microphone, controlled from an adjacent room. During the participants' stories the experimenter sat behind a screen. When the participant indicated that he or she had nothing else to say, the experimenter returned and asked all three to return to their computer to answer some questions.

¹Although a neutral baseline condition is normally useful to detect the direction of an effect, in this case it is difficult to define what neutral means. Operationalizing the absence of listeners' expression would result in an unnatural situation. Therefore, it was decided not to include a neutral condition, and to focus on the relative difference between positive and negative expressions.

Participants were first asked to report their current mood (*mood measure 2*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). This measure was identical to mood measure 1 complemented with the items "cheerful" and "sad." The two items of mood measure 2 that were identical to mood measure 1 were used to compute a *mood change* score by subtracting mood measure 1 from the two-item mood measure 2. Next, participants answered questions about how they described the film on seven-point scales ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*. Some of these items were meant to tap in to an abstract, interpretive style: "To what extent did you describe what the people in the film are like as a person?", "How lively did you describe the events?", "To what extent did you add things that were not directly visible in the film?". Other items were meant to tap in to a concrete, descriptive style: "To what extent did you carefully describe how the event occurred?", "To what extent does your description contain details of the events?", "To what extent did you objectively describe what happened in the film?".

As a manipulation check, participants were asked about their impression of the feelings of the other two participants (*perceived feelings*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). They indicated, on 10-point scales ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*, the extent to which they thought they experienced: positive feelings, negative feelings; and whether they were cheerful, sad, happy, angry, worried, bored, relaxed, grumpy, interested, pleased, annoyed.

Finally, a suspicion check was included. Only six participants reported doubts (in hindsight) about whether the other participants were indeed real participants. None of the participants reported awareness about being filmed, or of the real purpose of the study. Next, they were led out of the room where they were debriefed, thanked and paid by experimenter 1.

Dependent Variables

To analyze language use, the recordings of participants' spoken stories were fully and literally typed out. The transcribed texts were subsequently divided into sections to be coded for language abstraction. Only text about the content of the film was coded. Remarks about participants own experience, or fillers (e.g. "I don't know," "I forgot about that") or remarks to indicate the beginning or end of their story (e.g., "Well, the film I just watched . . .," "that's what I remember") were skipped.

The coding was done by two judges separately and blind to experimental condition (intercoder agreement, $r(54) = .88$) according to Semin and Fiedler's (1988, 1991) LCM. Each verb and adjective in the stories was scored as follows: descriptive-action verbs = 1, interpretive-action verbs/state-action verbs = 2, state-verbs = 3, adjectives = 4. On the basis of these scores, the mean level of abstraction was computed for each story separately by adding the different scores and dividing them by their number. The mean level of abstraction could thus vary between 1 (concrete) and 4 (abstract; Semin & Fiedler, 1989), and thus provides an index of how concrete or abstract a description is. To reach a final coding, the judges discussed the scores on which they disagreed, and a third judge checked all coding.

Additionally, the affective expression of participants during story telling were coded. Two judges separately watched the film recordings of participants, and for each 10 seconds of story telling, gave a score for the speakers expression on a scale ranging from 1 = negative, 3 = neutral, 5 = positive. The mean of all the scores of the two judges (intercoder agreement, $r(54) = .78$) was used as the final score for participants affective expression.

RESULTS

Three cases were excluded from analyses because they provided a single sentence event description or a story that was not about the content of the film, leaving 54 cases. Participant sex had no significant role in the reported data and is therefore not considered here.

Perceived, Experienced, and Expressed Affect

To analyze whether the listener expression manipulation indeed resulted in differences in perceived feelings, the perceived feelings scale was subjected to an independent *t*-test. Participants in the positive expression condition reported that the two

listeners experienced more positive feelings ($M = 6.32$; $SD = 0.93$) compared to the negative expression condition ($M = 4.59$; $SD = 1.02$), $t(52) = 6.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.81$, suggesting that the manipulation was successful.

In addition, the affective expression of the listeners affected participants' own affective expression and mood. Participants own expression during story telling was rated as more positive in the positive expression condition ($M = 3.54$; $SD = 0.76$) compared to the negative expression condition ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 0.71$), $t(52) = 2.35$, $p < .025$, $d = 0.65$. Also, after story telling (measure 2), participants reported a more positive mood in the positive expression condition ($M = 5.91$; $SD = 0.69$), compared to the negative expression condition ($M = 4.99$; $SD = 1.57$), $t(52) = 2.77$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.77$. Before participants started telling their story no differences in mood were observed between the positive ($M = 4.67$; $SD = 1.63$) and negative expression condition ($M = 4.24$; $SD = 1.48$; measure 1; $t < 1.1$, ns).

Moreover, perceived feelings was significantly related to participants expression, $r(54) = .27$, $p < .05$, reported mood in measure 2, $r(54) = .58$, $p < .001$, and mood change, $r(54) = .30$, $p < .05$. These findings indicate that the expressions of listeners elicited a congruent expression and mood in participants.

Language Use

To test the main hypothesis that the expression of listeners induces differences in language use, I analyzed the obtained linguistic variables. First note that no effects were observed of expression condition on the number of words used (overall $M = 323$, $SD = 147$, $t < 1.3$) or the time taken to tell the story (overall $M = 123$ seconds, $SD = 55$ seconds, $t < 1$). However, the predicted effect on language abstraction did emerge. In the positive expression condition participants used more abstract language to tell the story of the film ($M = 2.34$; $SD = 0.23$), in comparison to the negative expression condition ($M = 2.21$; $SD = 0.19$), $t(52) = 2.08$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.58$. In addition, perceived feelings was found to be significantly related to language abstraction, $r(54) = .34$, $p < .025$. This confirms the hypothesis.

When analyzing at a more specific level I found that the effect of expression condition on the mean language abstraction was mainly due to differences in the number of used abstract predicates. In both conditions, participants do tell the concrete facts of the event. That is, no differences were observed in the number of used concrete action verbs (dav and iav, t 's < 1.3 ; e.g., "He arranges newspapers in his stand," "customers enter the store and buy cigarettes"). However, in the positive (compared to negative) expression condition participants add relatively more interpretive and abstract statements (state-verbs and adjectives) about the events to the mere factual information (e.g., "He's had enough of it," "He doesn't trust people anymore," sv's, $t(52) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.56$; "the man is really a boring/sad/lonely person," adj's, $t(52) = 2.33$, $p < .025$, $d = 0.65$).

It is interesting to find out whether participants are to some extent aware of the linguistic bias they produce. Language abstraction was, across expression conditions, indeed positively related to participants' judgment about "whether they described what people are like as a person," $r(54) = .51$, $p < .001$, "how lively they described the events," $r(54) = .28$, $p < .05$, and "whether they added things that were not directly visible in the film," $r(54) = .23$, $p = .089$. The first two of these items also differed significantly between expression conditions: in the positive expression condition participants indicated that they said more about what people are like as a person ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.34$), and that they produced a more lively description ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.16$), compared to participants in the negative expression condition (resp., $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.44$, $t(52) = 2.45$, $p < .025$; $M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.93$, $t(52) = 3.75$, $p < .001$).

No effects of condition were observed on items tapping in to a concrete style of description (i.e., careful, detailed, objective). This might, however, reflect the previously discussed finding that the difference between conditions is mainly situated in the additional use of abstract statements.

Possible Mediation

From the literature one can both predict a direct effect of listeners' expression on language abstraction or a mediated effect, in which the effect is mediated by the speakers' own mood. To test this possible mediation, we used three measures of participant mood; reported mood (measure 2), participants' rated affective expression, and the mood change score. To establish mediation the following conditions must hold (Baron & Kenny, 1986):

First, the IV, listener expression condition must be predictive of the potential mediator. As reported before, this was the case for reported mood (measure 2) and participants' rated affective expression; these two potential mediators showed significant differences between listener expression conditions. Participants' mood change, however, was not significantly predicted by listener expression condition (dummy coded) in a linear regression analysis, $\beta = -.15$, $t(52) = 1.11$, $p = .27$.

Second, the IV, listener expression condition must be predictive of the dependent variable language abstraction. This condition holds, as reported before.

Third, when regressing the DV language abstraction simultaneously on both listener expression condition (dummy coded) and the potential mediator, the mediator must be significantly predictive of language abstraction. Three separate regression analyses, showed that this was not the case for each potential mediator (mood $\beta = .14$, $t < 1$, ns; expression $\beta = .13$, $t < 1$, ns; mood change $\beta = .24$, $t(51) = 1.78$, ns). Thus, mediation by participant mood was not established.

DISCUSSION

The present results confirm the hypothesis that affective expressions of listeners change a speaker's language use. Even though the listeners had no active speaking role in the interaction, their affective expression had a significant impact on how a story was told by participants. Participants telling a story to a smiling audience used relatively more abstract and interpretive language, compared to participants telling the same story to a frowning audience. These findings extend previous work on the effects of listeners in communication (Bavelas et al., 2000; Clark & Krych, 2004; Higgins, 1992) by revealing the effects of affective expression on language abstraction.

One likely explanation for these findings is that speakers use the affective expressions of their audience as signals about acceptance and understanding. Presumably, when talking to listeners who respond positively by smiling and nodding, abstraction is encouraged because such expressions are perceived as signals of agreement and understanding. In that case, speakers implicitly feel that abstract statements (conveying a more interpretive, subjective, and generalizing view of the event) are accepted and understood, and therefore appropriate. In contrast, listeners with a negative expression (e.g., frowning) signal a low level of agreement and acceptance. In that case, speakers feel that a more careful, analytic and descriptive style of formulating information is called for and refrain from interpretative statements.

It seems likely that the tuning of language abstraction in response to external affective cues is supported at an intra-personal level, by shifts in cognitive processing styles (Higgins, McCann, & Fondacaro, 1982; Zajonc, 1960). The affect-as-information-account (Schwarz, 2002; Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Soldat & Sinclair, 2001) provides a possible underlying mechanism for the described findings. Work within this framework has demonstrated that people rely on experienced or perceived affective cues to tune the way in which they cognitively process information (Bless, 2000; Schwarz, 2002). It seems likely that when speakers are confronted with an apparent positive, agreeing, and accepting audience, they tune to a global processing style, because the situation is benign. When confronted with an apparent negative, rejecting, and disagreeing audience, however, a more careful processing style is needed to deal with this situation. These different processing styles are reflected in language abstraction (Beukeboom & Semin, 2006). Thus, speakers in face-to-face conversations functionally use the affective expressions of listeners as information about how to deal with the communicated information.

In my view this describes a functional and adaptive conversational mechanism. Relying on affective cues to adopt the appropriate level of abstraction allows speakers to be responsive to the requirements of the conversation. It regulates the conversation process and implicitly helps speakers to efficiently maintain common ground (Krauss & Fussell, 1991; Krauss et al., 1977; Kraut et al., 1982). It is important to note, however, that conversation partners may not always strive to obtain full mutual agreement and understanding with each other. Take the example of a politician who does not want her audience to be aware of the concrete background of a decision. This person may, in the face of a crowd of frowning sceptical reporters, turn to using very abstract utterances (e.g., "Our prime goal in this endeavor is to protect freedom"), rather than provide more concrete information. A prerequisite for the proposed conversational mechanism may therefore be that a speaker has the goal to collaborate and adhere to what Grice (1975) referred to as the cooperative principle.

Consistent with previous work (Ottati et al., 1997; Soldat & Sinclair, 2001) a mediation analyses found no support for the idea that the observed effects of external affective cues were mediated by participants' own mood. Even though people's own mood is capable of inducing similar effects on language use (Beukeboom & Semin, 2006), in the present

interpersonal communicative situation the speaker's own mood was, although positively related, not significantly predictive of language abstraction. One reason for this might be that the speaker's mood was induced while speakers were telling their story, and possibly only by the end of their story (through mood contagion), which might have dampened its possible effect. Second, people do rely on different affective cues to tune their information processing style to the current situation. It might be the case that speakers experienced the external affective cues in the present interpersonal situation as a more informative cue than their own internal feelings. Future research may shed more light on these issues.

The present study focused on asymmetrical dialogues, in which only one person has a speaking role. It seems, however, very likely that similar processes occur in more interactive conversations. In this study, speakers mimicked the affective expression of the listeners and adopted a congruent mood state (*cf.* Hatfield et al., 1994; Neumann & Strack, 2000). In an interactive setting, wherein conversation partners are able to reply, the speaker's expression, in turn, is likely to induce differences in language use in the listeners' replies or questions. This way, conversation partners continuously influence each other's utterances. When both have positive expressions they will increasingly stimulate each other to utter interpretative and abstract statements about the topic of conversation. When they have negative expressions they will withhold each other from making interpretative statements, but instead cause one another to stick to concrete information. The fact that abstract and concrete language (e.g., in questions) induces replies at the same level of abstraction (Semin & De Poot, 1997) adds to this perpetuating process. Thus, subtle affective cues may strongly direct the course and outcome of conversations.

Another important implication is that tailoring messages to an audience not only affect the messages that are formulated, but also shape further inferences, memories, and subsequent representations of the communicated information. When formulating an abstract representation of an event to a smiling audience, people convey a subjective interpretation of the event and they imply more about the enduring personality of the described persons (e.g., he is a bored and lonesome person; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). Instead, to a frowning audience speakers provide merely concrete and contextual information, allowing for accurate and objective encoding (e.g., he gets up and goes to work, few people enter his store). Research on the saying-is-believing effect (Higgins & Rholes, 1978) has demonstrated that when a particular view of information is formulated, and accepted by the audience, this representation is also likely to be memorized, and regarded as a reliable and valid account of the event or target person (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005). Affective signals could thus determine the level of abstraction at which a shared representation, or shared reality is created (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 1992; Thompson & Fine, 1999).

Consider what this means. By merely smiling or frowning a listener could influence how a speaker reports information and how it is subsequently remembered, and possibly passed on. In, for instance, witness interrogations, job interviews, politics, or psychotherapy, a simple smile or frown could potentially have a large impact.

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